# Vonne Lester

## Good Memories and Friends

**SAMUEL CLEMENS**

Vonne Lester is not exactly a household name, but she had a varied and interesting career that began when she was just a teenager. In a way similar to Lana Turner's discovery, Vonne was spotted by an agent at a drugstore. She did several films, including *The Kid from Brooklyn* (1946), *Sunset Pass* (1946), *The Bamboo Blonde* (1946), *The Girl from Jones Beach* (1949), *Son of Sinbad* (1955), and *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), with television appearances on *The Thin Man* and *The David Niven Show*. The green-eyed brunette was born in Fargo, North Dakota, to Vern and Florence Hill. They moved to Los Angeles, where she attended Hollywood High School. In addition to being on contract to RKO, she worked at the William Morris Agency for years where she met some of Hollywood's greatest stars. She's 94 years old, and lives a peaceful life in San Diego with her husband, children, and grandchildren.

Samuel Clemens: How were you discovered?

Virginia Thorpe, Ruth Valmy and Vonne Lester in a publicity phot for The Kid From Brooklyn (1946).

Vonne Lester and George Cooper in a Halloween publicity shot.

**Vonne Lester**: I was in high school when an agent saw me at a drugstore. He said that I'd be great in films and that he wanted to photograph me. I wasn't sure if he was legitimate or just a pervert. I spoke with my mother, and we went to RKO, where he took photographs. He signed me to a seven-year contract. This was in 1945, and I was months shy of turning 18. My mother told me to lie and say that I was 18. She really wanted me to be a star. They knew I was still a minor, though, so we had to get a judge to approve the contract. That stalled things, and it was a year before I got to do some acting.

SC: How were you cast in *The Kid from Brooklyn*?

**Vonne Lester**: I was standing at what we used to say was a "cattle call." There were over 100 women lined up, and I was one of three chosen to do a screen test. Samuel Goldwyn told me to walk towards the camera, and turn to walk away. Before I knew it, I was cast as a Goldwyn Girl. I had no dialogue and not a lot to do.

SC: Were you close with the other Goldwyn Girls?

**Vonne Lester**: I was good friends with Diana Mumby [1922-74]. We were different in that she was career driven and I was not. She really wanted to be an actress, and she'd sleep with a lot of men in Hollywood to do it. She told me that she slept with Robert Taylor. Shirley Ballard was another one I was close with. She was a sweetheart who took me under her wing.

SC: What was RKO like as opposed to other studios you worked at?

**Vonne Lester**: You'd always see the same people there. The same group of women would be used in their films. They were really into publicity, too. After years there, I realized that I was doing more campaigning and touring than I was acting.

SC: Anything special about *The Desert Hawk* (1950) where you had a walk-on role?

**Vonne Lester**: That was a difficult film for me. I was in the process of divorcing my husband, so it wasn't a good experience. His name was Carl Botefuhr. He appeared in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and other films. We weren't compatible, which my mother told me before we got married.

SC: How about *Son of Sinbad*?

**Vonne Lester**: It was an involved film, and lavish. I was given a bow and arrow along with what seemed like hundreds of other women. There's a closeup of me in the scene where we're helping Dale [Robertson] and Vincent [Price] fend off a gang of outlaws. I made a good friend on the set named Joi Lansing. I liked her a lot, but she was undeniably strange. I felt that she had a lot of mental issues that went undiagnosed.

SC: Why did you stop acting?

**Vonne Lester**: You could say that I unofficially left the industry. There was a new executive at the studio who fired everybody, including me. I wasn't really doing any acting anyways. It was mostly walking in front of the camera, and any acting career that I had wasn't taking off. I had a daughter, as well, so I wanted something steady where I could bring home a paycheck. Bobby Van, who was a good friend of mine, got me a job at the William Morris Agency. I met a lot of great people there. I'd see Sinatra stop by a lot. I was terrified of him. Steve McQueen was another one who'd I'd talk to.

SC: Your last credited role was in an episode of *The Thin Man*. This was after a years-long hiatus from acting. How did that come about?

**Vonne Lester**: Peter [Lawford] had a meeting at the agency. Apparently, one of the models who was supposed to be the cigarette girl didn't show up. He saw me and asked if I still had my Screen Actors Guild card, which I did. That's when he offered me a part on *The Thin Man*. I was just a cigarette girl, though. It wasn't anything to boast about.

SC: What did you think of Peter Lawford?

**Vonne Lester**: He was fine. There was a rumor at the network that he was interested in me, but I knew that wasn't true.

SC: Was there a role that you wanted, but didn't get? How about a role that you rejected?

**Vonne Lester**: I was supposed to be in *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947). It wasn't anything special, just a secretary. It was filmed and everything, but they deleted my part with no explanation. It wasn't a speaking role or anything, but to be in such an iconic film...

SC: There's been a lot of controversy regarding Hollywood and the #MeToo movement. Did you ever experience any unwanted advances by men during your career?

**Vonne Lester**: Actually, I was groped by Frank Capra when I auditioned for him. As I left his office, he snuck behind me and grabbed my breasts. George Jessel was another one. He took me to dinner, and he was the most obnoxious man I ever met. Howard Hawks invited me to his house and asked for a massage. I said no, of course. Orson Welles pursued me while I was watching him and Natalie Wood rehearse for *Tomorrow Is Forever* (1946). That's partly why I stopped doing films.

SC: Would you ever return to acting if the opportunity arose?

**Vonne Lester**: I haven't been onscreen since I appeared in *The Heist* (1989). I wouldn't do another film anyways. I didn't love acting nor did I love Hollywood. It was something my mother wanted me to do. The best I can say is that I got some good memories and friends out of the whole experience.